

## Review of Presente! Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead

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**Book Review:**  
***Presente! Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead***

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*Presente! Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead.* Kyle B.T. Lambelet. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019. Xiv + 214 pp. ISBN: 9781626167254 (HB); 9781626167278 (paper). \$119.95 HB; \$31.95 paper.

In *Presente!*, Kyle Lambelet analyzes the movement to close the School of the Americas (SOA), a US Department of Defense institute in Ft. Benning, Georgia. The SOA trains many Latin American military officers, many of whom have been involved in human rights abuses. The SOA Watch movement began in 1990, following the November 1989 massacre at the University of Central America in San Salvador. Some SOA-trained soldiers killed six Jesuit priests, including several prominent critics of the Salvadoran government, their housekeeper, and her daughter. The SOA Watch began organizing demonstrations at Ft Benning every November, which included what Lambelet calls the “litany” of calling out the names of Latin American victims of SOA violence. His book analyzes the meaning of this ritual and, more broadly, the meaning of both the evocation of the dead and of non-violence in movements for social change.

Lambelet, a theologian, attended a number of the annual SOA vigils and conducted numerous interviews with participants. His research does not provide a full portrait of the movement, as a true ethnography would, but is rather what he calls an “extended case study.” It provides a foundation for his reflections on a variety of themes that are central both to political theology and to social movement theory.

Perhaps his most important overarching themes is the paradoxical nature of religiously-grounded protest, and in particular liturgical practices such as the litany of the dead. While ritual practices and theological convictions can be powerful forces in movements for social change, he argues, they carry a number of risks and there is no inevitable line from faith to effective political action. To flesh out this argument, he analyzes several tensions inherent in such practices and argues, in each case, that the practices of SOA Watch contribute toward a resolution of these tensions.

The first and perhaps broadest tension he identifies is between practical reason and messianic faith. He argues that practical reason, or the capacity to discern the goods at stake in a particular action and the means appropriate to achieve those goods, is a necessary political tool, even more when religion is central to political analysis and action (p. 6). However, he rejects the notion that faith is necessarily opposed to practical reason. The two can be brought together, in particular, via practices such as liturgy, which “generates obligations of solidarity that issue forth into effective political action” (p.12). Such rituals create solidarity, commit the living to emulate the examples of the martyrs, and ground a critique of the unjust power struggles that led to the killing. These are

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all necessary preconditions for political action, but the ritual itself “does not complete the work it sets out to do” (p. 40).

Second, and related to this, Lambelet notes the tension between quietism and messianism. Paradoxically, religious faith can generate either withdrawal from effective action or an extremism that uses violence to achieve God-sanctified aims. He argues, again, that shared religious practices can mediate between these extremes and help generate constructive resolutions. Thus, “the messianic affirmation of the presence of the dead not only can evade each of these problems but also can generate a nonviolent politics rooted in distinctive forms of practical reasoning” (p. 3).

A third tension exists between reformists and revolutionaries, both within the movement and in analyses of it. Lambelet notes that the question of how to pursue lasting change is a longstanding challenge for activists, one which “often pits reformers and revolutionaries against each other” (p. 100). Again, he rejects mutually exclusive extremes and asserts that we need not choose between them, because “piecemeal change through means of reform,” he believes, can “be used in the service of the end of broader societal transformation . . . reform and revolution need not be necessarily construed as oppositional” (p. 100-101). While reformists work within the system and revolutionaries work outside it, the two groups can coordinate and work together, at least in a pluralistic movement such as SOA Watch (p. 112). They do so, in part, by “appeals to a higher law” which resonate with both. The notion of that there is a divine law that supercedes human ones “allows activists to render coherent both the transgression and the appropriation of the law by its relationship to a messianic fulfillment of the law” (p. 127).

A fourth and final tension lies between a strategic interpretation of nonviolent protest, on the one hand, and a “principled” interpretation, on the other. The former sees nonviolence in instrumental terms, as a choice for the most effective tactics in a given struggle. Lambelet argues that this fails to grasp the nature of moral principles. Advocates of the strategic interpretation assume that “principles are basically static commitments that are formed outside the realm of politics and applied unidirectionally.” However, Lambelet’s research shows that “principles are embodied, performed, and developed through iterative practice” (p. 81). For SOA Watch, commitments to solidarity are both expressed and formed by the *presente!* litany. “It is not as though there is a static repository of moral principles in culture, religion, or moral tradition that can be stably deployed,” he notes. “Rather, traditions of moral reasoning themselves are constantly in development, and the artifacts of those traditions change and develop over time” (p.81).

This insight transcends Lambelet’s arguments about the ways that the litany of the dead, and religious ritual in general, can contribute to social change. He challenges the common assumption that ideas and action are related in a linear way and instead supports the pragmatist claim that ideas and practices are always engaged in mutually transformative interaction. This is true, as he shows, even of supposedly “absolute” ideas about faith, God, and the higher law. Rituals such as

the *presente!* litany can generate not only solidarity and commitment but also dramatic moral and ideological change.

This is part of Lambelet's broader argument about the unique place of religion in movements for social change. Religion, he asserts, can enable the resolution of conflicts that might otherwise doom protests such as the SOA rallies. This is true in relation to the tensions between messianism and quietism, reform and revolution, and also between particular social groups. He notes the "deep pluralism" generated at the SOA protests, which bring together diverse participants in a shared ritual practice (p. 59). The *presente!* litany, he argues, unites Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, and secular activists, as well as Latin Americans and North Americans, victims of political violence and citizens of the nation that enables it.

Lambelet writes, however, not only or even primarily as an outside observer but as an insider to the faith traditions he describes. He affirms his own interpretation, not just of the effectiveness or historical significance of the SOA protests but of their ultimate correctness. This is not a social scientific claim, but a theological one, as is his conclusion that "By attending to the moral demands of faithfulness and effectiveness, the messianic politics of sacrifice can be rightly used to undermine and transform oppressive systems that generate suffering in the first place" (p. 141). For him, as for the participants in the movement, "the crucified people are present as a messianic sign that the current age is being broken open, that the strictures of death are not being overturned, and that resurrection is breaking in among us" (p. 4).

Without assessing the ultimate truth of this claim – that resurrection is breaking in among us – we can assess the contributions that *Presente!* makes. First, the book provides an in-depth and richly documented look at the activities and values of a unique social movement. Although Lambelet's general approval of the SOA Watch is evident throughout the book, he does offer occasional critiques and questions, as well as documenting tensions within the movement. In addition, the book contributes to scholarly understanding of the distinctive ways that religion can enrich and also complicate social movements. Its attention to the powerful role of ritual is especially helpful, as is his analysis of the fluid relations between principles and actions. Overall, *Presente!* is a valuable contribution both to studies of nonviolent protest and to social movement theory, which too often ignores or dismisses religion.